

Greek Drama: Antigone Background Information Part One

In 468 B.C., the year the playwright **Sophocles** wrote his first play, Athens was still on its way to becoming the wealthiest and most powerful state that the Greek world would ever know. By 406 B.C., the year Sophocles died, Athens was on the verge of total defeat by the Spartans and their allies in the Peloponnesian War. During this period, Pericles defined democracy, the monuments of the Acropolis were built and all but two of the surviving Greek tragedies were written. This was a glorious time.

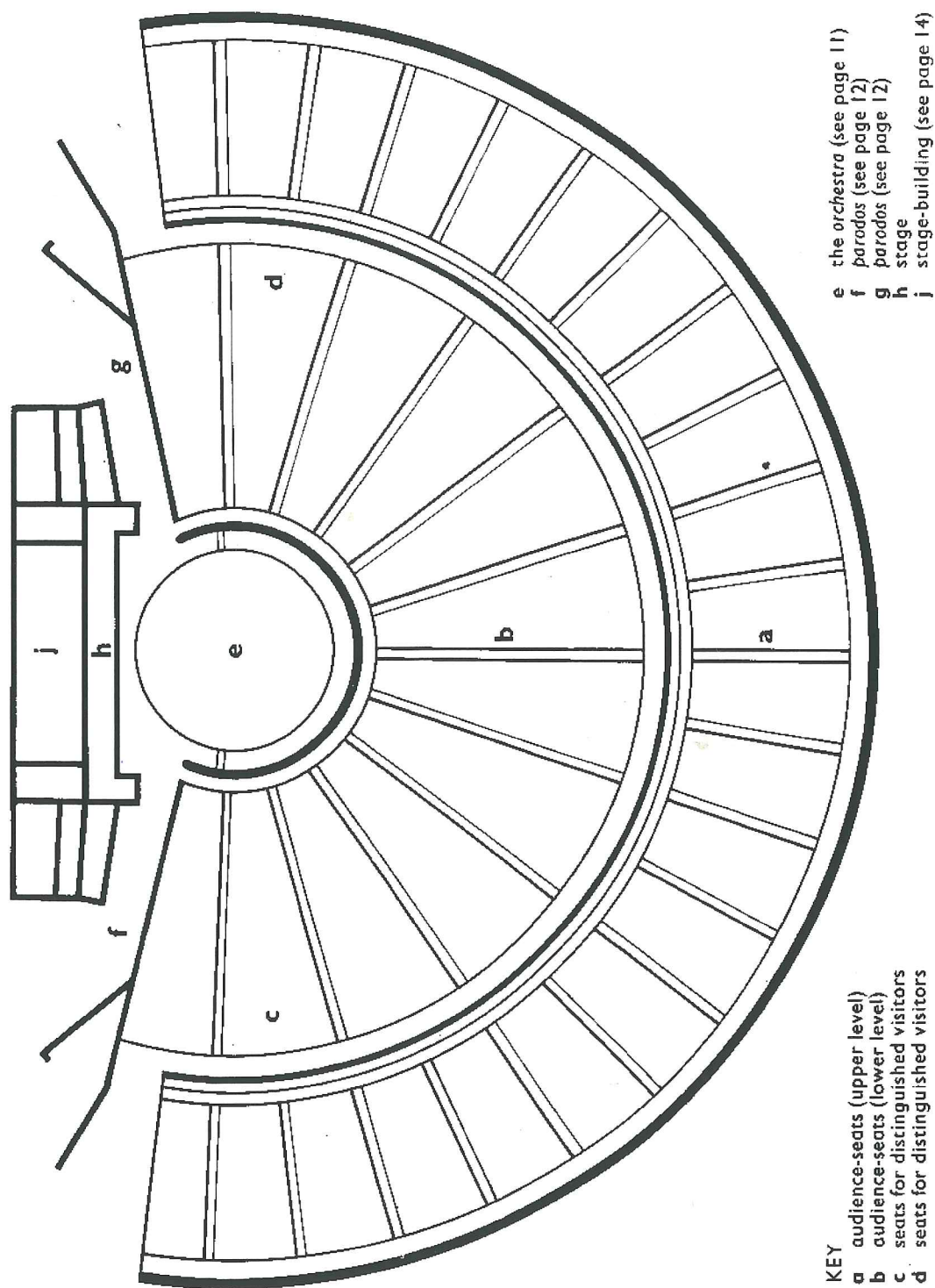
Let's take a look at this wonderful peak of Greek theater and see why it was so unique. Every year in March, the people of Athens believed that the god Dionysus brought spring back to Greece. **Dionysus** was the god of wine, music and drama. Thus people held a great spring festival which lasted seven days. Everyone was off work, even the slaves. But the most important part of this celebration was the play competition. For each of four days of this competition, people got up at dawn and watched five new plays performed. Prizes were awarded to the best playwrights and the best actors.

Performances were considered to be such an important part of community life that poor Athenians who could not afford admission were considered guests of the state. People would be reimbursed for the loss of wages and all businesses were closed, even law courts were closed and prisoners were released from jail. It was believed that theater was a part of every Greek's education. In fact, the festivals were a major civic occasion in which even allies and resident-aliens were invited to attend. Allied tributes were displayed in front of the people and orphans of Athenians killed in battle received their first suits of honor publicly.

These plays were held in huge open-air theaters, the arenas on which today's football stadiums are modeled. They were very large and held up to 18,000 people. The ancient builders of theaters found a site on a hillside that had just the right size and shape and then leveled off a stage at the bottom and leveled seats going up the hill. This was much more logical than trying to build the theater up from ground level.

At the great Dionysus Festival, mostly **tragedies** were performed. Several months before each festival, a selection committee met to choose the plays to be performed. Each tragic playwright sent four plays to be performed on the same day and comic playwrights sent one play each. The committee selected the plays as well as a leading actor for each one. The leading actors, whose salaries were paid by the state, had to find actors for smaller parts and were responsible for rehearsing the play. The chorus would be hired and trained by a separate, wealthy Athenian who was chosen by the officials. This chorus of 15 had to sing and dance in honor of the gods.

Greek Theater



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The rich man who provided the chorus also had to provide costumes and masks, arrange rehearsals and train musicians. He often hired a professional producer to do these jobs for him and this was often the playwright himself.

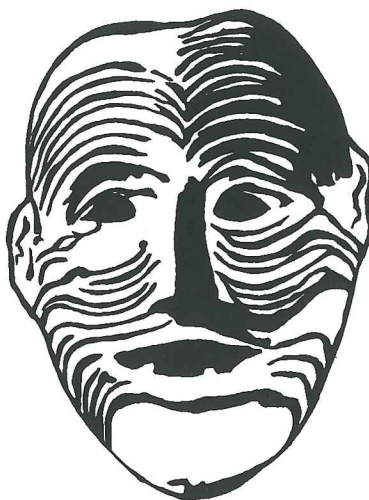
During the competition, the judges would, at the end of each day, write their choices for winner down on clay tablets. The first play to be chosen by five judges was the winner. The best actor would also receive an award.

Masks were always worn so that the vast audience could see facial expressions of sadness or happiness more clearly. Some actors had up to 6 parts each and by changing masks instead of changing whole costumes, they could change roles more rapidly. The masks were made of thin clay or stiffened fabric. They had huge mouths which helped amplify the actors voices.

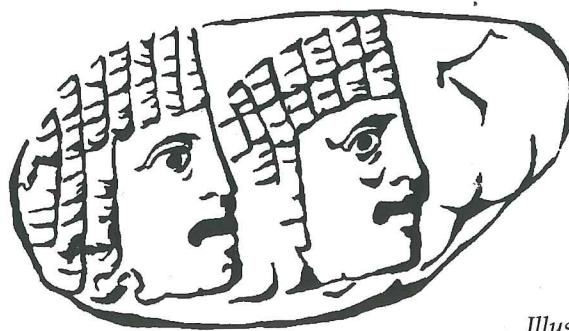
All Greek actors were men. Some became very famous for their skill in playing female roles. Second and third actors would have to shift from playing the role of dancing young girls in one scene to old wise men in another. Most of these actors aspired to starting their own companies and becoming leading actors themselves.

Theatrical Masks

Comic Mask



Tragic Masks



Illustrations by Carole Collier Frick

Greek Drama: Antigone Background Information Part Two

Sophocles (496-406 B.C.) was one of the great tragic playwrights of Greek theater. He wrote 123 plays, seven of which survive. One of these plays, *Antigone*, was probably written in about 442 B.C. It deals with the enduring theme of drama and philosophy: whether to observe the laws of a state or the laws of one's own conscience. Antigone's brother, who is considered a traitor to the state, has been killed. **King Creon** orders that no one is to bury him: he is to be left on the plain to rot. But Antigone disagrees: the gods say that people must honor their brothers, whatever they do. So she buries the body. She is arrested and brought before King Creon.

